

Militia

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tia until the militia started to surface.

"The fruitcakes — that's our problem. We don't have a big problem, but it's noisy."

Both Smith and Kemp said the movement needs to clearly state its goals, weed out the wackos in its ranks and separate itself from racial revolutionaries and armed zealots of the Far Right.

"Between the racist label and the bombing of Oklahoma City, the militia movement has been tarred," Kemp said. "Every militia-oriented individual feels like a target of the media, and all of us feel this drive to vindicate our movement."

At the very least, Vanderboegh's current push proves the militia movement is amorphous and free-flowing, not uniform or monolithic.

"Trying to get militia folk to do anything like a declaration is like trying to herd cats and chickens together," said Vanderboegh, a Presbyterian who is a member of Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership and was an anti-war protester during the Vietnam era.

"Militia folks are individualists; they're fractious."

But this lack of formality also explains the presence of militia leaders with ties to white-supremacist groups, such as John Trettmann, head of the Militia of Montana and a former associate of Aryan Nation leader Richard Butler of Hayden Lake, Idaho.

And because of its very loose-knit nature, with few formal membership rolls and nothing approaching a uniform code of conduct or other organizational trappings, the movement has attracted a wide spectrum of disaffected, mostly male, mostly white recruits.

"To paint all with one brush that is identical is just not right," said Bill Wasmuth, executive director of the Northwest Coalition Against Malignant Harassment, a civil-rights watchdog group with offices in Seattle and Portland, Ore. "There are some militias with more violent tendencies, some with clear connections to the Klan and other white-supremacist groups. And some are of a different stripe."

Civil-rights watchdog groups dismiss Vanderboegh's effort. They say the presence of militia leaders with a racist past, combined with arrests and uncovered conspiracies, like the Viper Militia of Arizona and their alleged plans to blow up government buildings, proves that the mili-

tia movement and its advocacy of armed resistance is a threat to the American public.

"Making charges against the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nations is all well and good, but there's enough Klansmen, Aryan Nations and white supremacists involved in the militia movement to make these charges irrelevant," said Mike Reynolds, an analyst for KlanWatch, the investigatory arm of the Southern Poverty Law Center of Montgomery, Ala.

Given the amorphous nature of the far-right fringe, today's militiaman can be tomorrow's Christian patriot or militant tax protester or freeman. The lines are loose, and the dogma of one group flows freely to another, via the Internet or other more old-fashioned outlets, like books.

"There are militias out there who have no racial agenda at all, but they're in lock step with those who do," Reynolds said. "They have a common enemy — the federal government — and it's very difficult to separate relationships in the broad patriot movement."

Reynolds also blasts the racially homogeneous nature of the militia movement. Minority militiamen are rare; the few are trotted out as showcase examples of militia diversity.

"How many people of color do you see flocking to this movement?" Reynolds asked. "They may not be racists, but there's something about the movement that isn't attractive to people of color. Why is that?"

Despite the public stance of Vanderboegh and others, other civil-rights watchdogs say there is a subtler form of racism implicit in the constitutional interpretations of the militia movement, particularly their insistence on a literal interpretation of the document and their advocacy of states rights.

"It's not an overt racism," Wasmuth said. "It's support for an interpretation of the Constitution that's very fundamentalist, very literal."

"They want the Constitution interpreted as it was 200 years ago. As it was then, it gave rights to a very select group of people — white property owners — and excluded women and people of color."

Kemp and Vanderboegh strongly disagree.

"I personally tend to read the Bill of Rights," Kemp said. "That cancels out all that other stuff. The Bill of Rights cancels any archaic notions of inferior citizenship."

Said Vanderboegh: "I don't want to go back to the plantation. I don't want to go back to states' rights. But there was a point being made about overweening federal power that I think applies to today."

(Mount Clipping in Space Below)

Militia movement confronting necessity to clean up its act

By JIM NESBITT

Newhouse News Service

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. -- Ever since the tragic explosion at Oklahoma City, scene of the nation's deadliest incident of domestic terrorism, America's militia movement has been branded as a gun-toting and conspiracy-crazed lot, their ranks riven with Klansmen and neo-Nazi racists.

This image has been burned into the public consciousness by periodic arrests of militiamen in Arizona, Georgia and other states and fanned by civil-rights watchdog groups like the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and KlanWatch.

But in recent months, there has been an organized effort by a scattering of like-minded militia leaders across the country to denounce racism and acts of domestic terrorism, and to draw a sharp contrast between their movement and others on the far-right fringe who also preach an anti-government message.

The militia movement isn't about white supremacy or armed revolt, they say. It is about the perceived threat to the Second Amendment rights of gun owners posed by the Brady Bill and the assault-weapons ban. It is rooted in the fear of oppressive government power, as exemplified by the Branch Davidian tragedy at Waco, and the Randy Wayne Weaver shootout at Ruby Ridge, Idaho.

"This is a constitutional movement -- this is not about race," said Mike Vanderboegh, an outspoken Alabama militiaman who is a leader in the effort to burnish the movement's image. "The spontaneous militia that sprung up in the wake of Waco, Ruby Ridge and the Brady Bill are primarily Second Amendment people who were convinced that conventional means of ensuring those rights weren't sufficient."

Vanderboegh, a dispatcher for a local metals firm, is also author of the Alabama Declaration, a lengthy militia document that denounces racism and domestic terrorism

while pointing a finger at white supremacists as the possible partners of Oklahoma City bombing suspects Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols.

If it gathers steam, Vanderboegh's effort could turn into a struggle for the soul of the militia movement, an attempt to place some distance between militiamen more interested in gun owners' rights and law-enforcement abuses, and others pushing a more violent, revolutionary or racial agenda.

"There's a backing off from the revolutionary rhetoric in that movement," said Dick Beavis, a Dallas-based author who wrote *Aches of Waco*, an analysis of the Branch Davidian assault. "The more Vanderboegh and others can get the movement to civilize, so that next year, they're marching in our Fourth of July parade and cooking barbecue, the more mainstream Americanized the militia movement becomes."

However, some critics of militias think the declaration is a public relations stunt and not to be trusted.

The Alabama Declaration contends that Nichols and McVeigh had connections to a white supremacist compound in Oklahoma known as Eldon City -- an attempt to shift attention away from the pair's brief association with the Michigan Militia and other militia types in Kingman, Ariz. It also repeats the popular contention among militiamen, Christian patriots and other right-wing extremists that the bombing was the result of a federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms sting operation that went sour.

The document even goes so far as to pin the identity of the infamous John Doe No. 2, the swarthy, muscular bombing suspect whose police-sketch image was circulated nationwide, on a Philadelphia-born white supremacist.

But it is this very reliance on an alternative theory for the bombing that undermines the image-polishing effort. It gives critics the opportunity to dismiss the document as yet another conspiracy theory on par with the militia's endless preoccupation with the New World Order, a potential invasion of America by former Warsaw Pact troops led by the United Nations and that constant militia bugaboo -- black U.N. helicopters, scouts for the coming invasion.

Some militia leaders worry about trotting out another conspiracy theory to rehabilitate the image of the militia movement.

"Mike (Vanderboegh) makes it a little too easy to be shot down," said Mike Kemp, spokesman for the Gadsden Minutemen, a militia group based in Gadsden, Ala. "From my perspective, anything that will take the heat away, anything that will correct the image, should be done. ... But if we issue anything that can be used against us, it will be used against us."

Said Ray Smith, a militia leader from Texas: "We'd be better off letting the fringe die off from lack of attention. ... We've got about 1 percent we've got to watch: people who've been in this racial thing for years and weren't considered mil-

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